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Terrorism as an effective form of political communication: the ISIS case and the global influence of its Virtual Caliphate

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ABSTRACT

In attempting to investigate whether terrorism may be regarded as an effective form of political communication, the present essay examines the sophisticated media apparatus and narrative built by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The latter stands out in the jihadi galaxy for having drawn, as of December 2015, about 30.000 foreign fighters from at least 85 countries to the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields by virtue of its profitable propaganda machine (Benmelech and Klor, 2016).

The first section of this essay offers a general definition of terrorism as an ineluctably political act involving a symbolic interaction with an audience. Furthermore, it analyses the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and media.

The second section introduces Pattwell, Mitman and Porpora's (2015) theory of terrorism as failed political communication.

The third section delves into the media strategy designed by ISIS that carefully balances centralised bureaucracy and decentralised dissemination. Both the tools employed and the main themes addressed will be examined.

The fourth section explores the on-going passage from Real to Virtual Caliphate as an evidence of the effectiveness of ISIS's political communication, which has been capable of creating a resilient global network.

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In conclusion, the theory of terrorism as an effective form of political communication will be compared with that of terrorism as failed political communication.

"TERRORISM IS THEATRE"

In the absence of a universally acknowledged definition of terrorism, Bruce Hoffman (2006) has revealed the inherent political character of terrorism. Hence, terrorism may be described as "*the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change*" (Hoffman, 2006, 40). Terrorism has to be distinguished from ordinary crime in that the latter is not intended to have consequences beyond the act itself. As a matter of fact, criminals act upon their personal greed or need and do not seek public recognition. By contrast, terrorists portray themselves as freedom fighters or martyrs sacrificing themselves for the sake of a greater ideal.

Due to their nature of subnational group or non-state entity, terrorists lack the influence and leverage necessary to achieve their goal of generating or consolidating power.

Thus, a thoughtfully choreographed act of violence, including elements of great drama, represents an essential requirement to penetrate the global political stage and attract attention to the group's cause. In consonance with the theory of "propaganda by deed" attributed to the Italian republican extremist Carlo Pisacane (Hoffman, 2006), violence satisfies the twofold purpose of spawning publicity for a cause and educating the masses.

As Jenkins stated, "*Terrorism is theatre*" (Jenkins, 1974, 4). Terrorists perform with an audience in mind and aspire to generate an atmosphere of fear in order to magnify their power beyond their actual capabilities.

Terrorism may be constructed as a form of political communication in that it gains significance insofar as it is reported and propagated through the mass media to an audience. The real objective behind the violence perpetrated lies in the "*people watching, not the actual victims*" (ibidem). In fact, the success of a terrorist act rests on the efficacy of the multiplier effect and is measured on the basis of its far-reaching psychological repercussions, not merely on the material destruction of the target. As Luis Veres (2004) indicated, terrorism entails the

overthrow of the traditional relationship between news and facts. News no longer depends on the facts; facts have turned into a function of the news-making process. In such a way, the news acquires an eternal presence that preserves the life of the fact beyond its expiration.

Frederick Hacker declared that terrorists "*play to and for an audience*" (Hacker, 1977, xi).

The targeted audience comprises three main groups, namely sympathizers, governments and neutrals. Interestingly, the message conveyed may vary for each recipient, but it is always conceived to promote change and manipulate political behaviour.

Sympathizers constitute a relevant segment within the audience because they provide the terrorist group with material, financial or spiritual support. Hence, terrorists' communication fulfils an internal purpose, as it strengthens internal solidarity and fosters morale.

Governments are addressed to impede the enactment of policies unfavourable to terrorists and to undermine their legitimacy, by alienating public opinion. As a matter of fact, terrorists may induce governmental bodies to execute excessive counter-measures, guaranteeing the group the opportunity to depict itself as a victim. In this case, terrorists' communication serves a coercive function, as it intends to ensure compliance through intimidation.

Finally, terrorists strive to engage in a dialogue with neutrals in order to make new converts, inform by delivering alternative narrative and solicit support. The purpose of this peculiar type of communication is didactic.

In conclusion, terrorists' communication aims at affecting both a committed and an uncommitted audience, which, in the words of Joseph Matusitz, is "*the interpretive community reacting or responding to a message*" (Matusitz, 2012, 77).

Pursuant to Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model, it could be argued that, when decoding the embedded meaning of a text created by terrorist organizations, sympathizers will take on a dominant position, as they share *in toto* the preferred reading. This condition gives rise to a social echo chamber, where information and/or disinformation, ideas and beliefs are amplified or reinforced inside the community (Sunstein, 2001).

Since the political regime is expected to disagree with the values and beliefs expressed by the sender of the message, it will reject the dominant code, yielding an oppositional reading. Neutrals are likely to identify the dominant message, but their social and cultural status prevents them from completely accepting the message the way the encoder intended.

Accordingly, they tend to modify it in a way that mirrors their own position. This results in a negotiated reading.
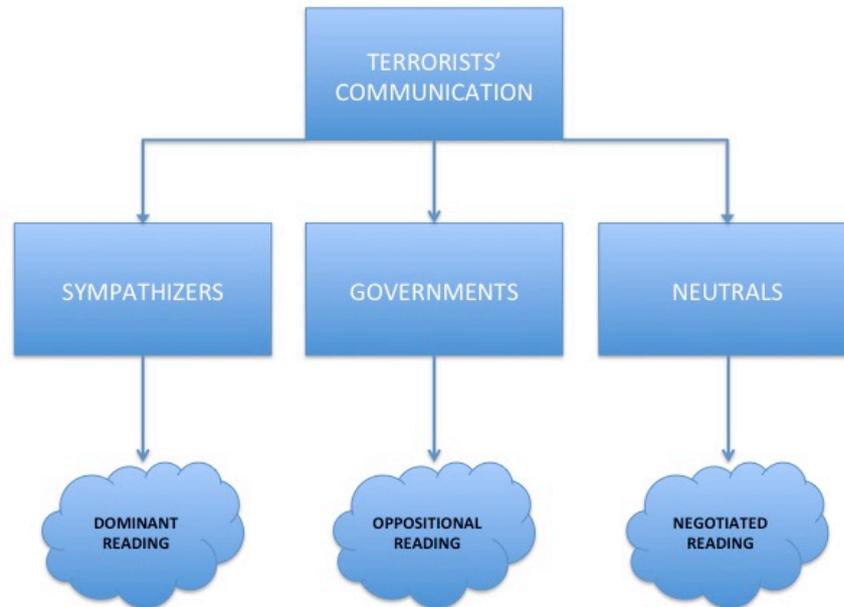

Fig.1: Application of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to terrorists' communication

Due to the fact that the ambition of terrorism is to influence a plethora of audiences, it is evident that "*acts of terrorism are means of persuasion*" (Matusitz, 2012, 80).
According to the Yale attitude change approach elaborated by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953), terrorists' communication goes through six stages.

1.   Exposure consists of the quasi-instant broadcast of the terrorists' message through the tailor-made medium and to the pertinent audience. Since mass media are omnipresent in our everyday lives, terrorists can smoothly apply to a global audience.

2.   In an information-overloaded world, attention shall be gained by realizing spectacular acts of violence.

3.   Comprehension of the terrorists' message is conditioned by variables such as personal motivation, issue involvement and cultural background.

4.   Acceptance must follow. The audience must grasp the message and internalise it.

5.   Retention is the *sine qua non* condition for shaping political behaviour. Therefore, a terrorist message must make a lasting impression.

6.   Altered attitude must be translated into new behaviour.

Traditionally, the media had a monopoly on covering and depicting terrorist attacks. Therefore, terrorists' hopes of garnering publicity for their causes and activities depended on attracting the attention of television, radio, or the print media. In other words, terrorists had to reach the "selection thresholds" (multistage processes of editorial selection) held by media.

Now, terrorist groups can tailor their recruiting pitch with their usage of "narrowcasting", that is, delivering different messages to individuals based on their age, gender, location, or other factors (Lieberman, 2017). Historically, two technological developments have afforded them the opportunity to enjoy a worldwide platform, namely the Internet and private terrorist-owned televisions.

The transition from broadcasting (one-to-many classical mass media) to conversation and sharing (many-to-many social media) implied by Information Technology has to be considered a major turning point in communication studies. Indeed, the rise of "*media-wise terrorism*" (Weimann, 2015, 51) has been favoured by the peculiar design of the Internet. Unregulated, cost-effective and guaranteeing almost perfect anonymity, it has demonstrated to be an extremely advantageous medium for both external (propaganda for recruitment and fund-raising) and internal (command, control and logistics) purposes, turning into a sort of "*virtual sanctuary*" (Hoffman, 2006, 214). Above all, the interactive capabilities of the Internet, such as social networks, chat rooms and online communities, enable terrorists to assume a proactive position and portray themselves in the light they wish, managing their perception before the world.

Moreover, one of the most startling advances in terrorist communications lies in the rise of terrorist-owned television stations, with Hezbollah's Al-Manar being the main example (Hoffman, 2006). They enabled groups to assume complete control over the content, context and footage.

Terrorism and media are intertwined in a dangerous relationship of mutual exploitation and manipulation: the former ontologically hinges on the presence of an audience, whereas the latter are a vulnerable vacuum to be filled with gripping, dramatic news.

The ability to transmit breaking news and reports 24/7 spawned intense competition among rival networks. Together with the increasing constraints of news budgets, which need to be justified and compensated by a high number of views, this resulted in a "trivialization of television news" that inexorably focus on the "*human-interest angle*" rather than genuine analysis (Hoffman, 2006, 180). Thus, media want to ensure the longevity of a story, just like terrorists do.

Lukaszewski, a public relations consultant to the U.S. military, compares the symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorists to a dance of death: "*Media coverage and terrorism are soul mates - virtually inseparable. They feed off each other. They together create a dance of death - the one for political or ideological motives, the other for commercial success*" (Chuipka, 2006, 52).

Nevertheless, this paradoxically symbiotic relationship proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, by indirectly projecting terror into individuals' lives, media promote terrorism's self-empowerment. On the other hand, they release information that might pierce the veil of secrecy all terrorist groups need. In fact, the obsession with publicity often leads to the unmasking and arrest of members of the terrorist network, as in the case of the climax of the so-called Unabomber's terrorist campaign. As Hoffman reports, the author of a series of mail bombings between 1978 and 1995 came to be identified when his desire to publish his manifesto was recognized (Hoffman, 2006).

TERRORISM AS FAILED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Having acknowledged that terrorism is a form of political communication that should be studied as such, Pattwell, Mitman and Porpora (2015) argue that it is destined to fail for a number of reasons.

By drawing on Habermas' (1981) distinction between strategic and communicative action, the authors maintain that communicative action, even when it is directed at a strategic goal, depends on mutual understanding. Terrorism is formulated as an act of moral confrontation based on an oppositional logic between good and evil. It fails at achieving mutual understanding because the audience should accept that it is "*so culpable as deserving of violent response*" (Pattwell, Mitman and Porpora, 2015, 1133).

Furthermore, the authors discuss that targeted audiences are often unaware of the group's feeling of injustice and cannot put it into context. Thus, they do not attend to the dialogue easily.

Finally, communication requires interpretation. Governments having hegemonic control typically decode terrorist acts in a way that satisfies their interest and offer one side of the story through mainstream media.

In this perspective, if Al-Qaeda's four coordinated 11 September attacks had the purpose of maneuvering American foreign policy, it was an inefficacious act of communication because it was violent in nature; because the American public had little prior awareness of the group's history and resentment and because American public opinion was only shaped by Bush's biased rhetoric.

FROM SWORDS TO WORDS: ISIS'S VIRTUAL JIHAD

In the Information Age, media undoubtedly play a crucial role in the terrorists' calculus, as witnessed by the effort of jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS to incorporate the media imperative. In the battle for the hearts and minds of the *umma*, the war of narratives has gained more prominence than that of the classical bullets and fire weapons.

If Al-Qaeda has been one of the first terrorist organizations to equip itself with members dedicated to the masterful production and dissemination of media products, ISIS transformed "*a local ground war into a global phenomenon*" through a well-defined, coherent information strategy (Gambhir, 2016, 9). By advocating the immediate establishment of the Caliphate, ISIS gathered worldwide support and was able to position itself as the reference point of a scattered community. This was also made possible by its revolutionary development of custom-fit content for niche audiences, targeting the viewers' ethnicity or age.

Moreover, ISIS operationalized social media, employing the full spectrum of mass media as a force multiplier: "*in the minds of foreign fighters, social media is not merely virtual: it has become an essential part of what happens on the ground*" (Carter, Maher, Neumann, 2014, 68).

ISIS has mastered the virtual world thanks to the dialectic between the centralized approach conducted by an official media branch integrated in the core of the operational apparatus and the decentralized dissemination of media products carried out by online supporters. The former granted the group the chance to guide its media employees with the same speed and method of military forces and has to be credited with ISIS's adaptive behaviour, while the latter secured the resiliency of ISIS's digital presence in spite of international efforts to restrict it. Therefore, a single media foundation complemented with multiple pockets was envisaged.

The Base Foundation, or *al-Mu'asasat al-Um*, is at the head of ISIS's media apparatus and is responsible for branding the self-styled Caliphate through the production of high-quality videos, battlefield photoshoots and appealing multilingual magazines. It is said to be located either in Iraq or Syria.

The Base Foundation was charged with the task of structuring media campaigns and setting the priorities. It also oversaw the formation of new media offices in the 35 governorates, or *wilayats*, of the Caliphate and directly supervised their work by receiving accurate monthly reports. The external provinces established in the lands conquered by ISIS's militias released content related to military operations, service provision, and daily life. In addition to that, they circulated hard copies of ISIS's official media to civilians under ISIS's control in order to mobilize local populations.
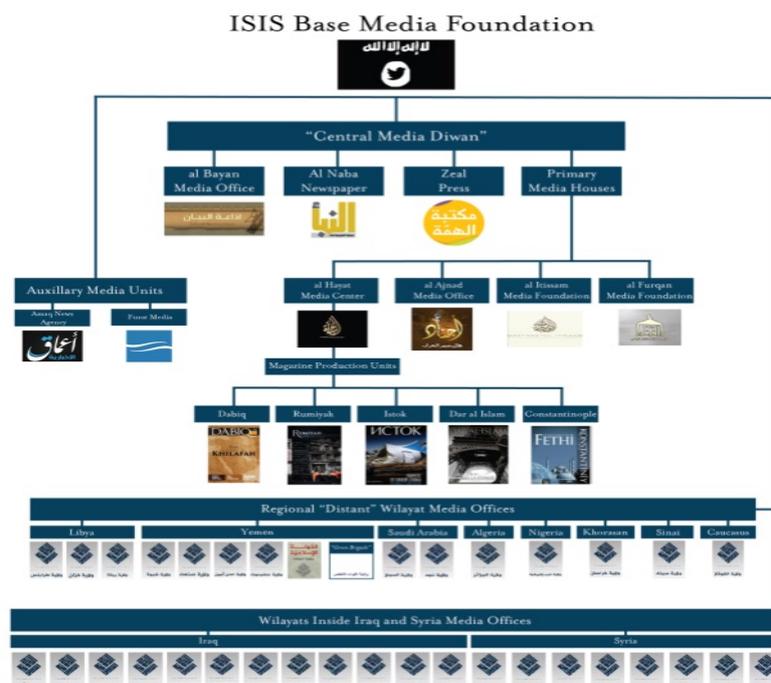
Fig.2: ISIS's Media Apparatus

The Base Foundation managed ISIS's main media houses, which include the Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, the Al-Hayat Media Center, the Al-I'tisam Media Foundation and the auxiliary Amaq News Agency.

Founded in 2006, the Al-Furqan Institute of Media Production is ISIS's oldest media branch and represents "*a reliq of Al-Qaeda's heritage*" (Gambhir, 2016, 22). It is specialized in the making of videos of religious sermons and speeches from leading figures in the group.

The Al-Hayat Media Center was launched in 2014 and published ISIS's magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* in several multiple languages.

Finally, Amaq News Agency is a news outlet linked to ISIS that has often been the first to claim responsibility for attacks on behalf of the group.

The Base Foundation also administered ISIS's overseas al-Bayan radio, that broadcasted *nasheed* glorifying Islam as well as news updates.

The importance attributed to communication by ISIS is demonstrated by the economic privileges enjoyed by members of the media office, who earned a regular income - higher than that of soldiers - and were exempted from taxes.

One of the preeminent features of ISIS's communication strategy lies in the parallelism between information and military operations in order to maximally sustain military objectives and adapt to territorial changes. This has been made possible by the synergy between ISIS's media, military and religious organs. As a matter of fact, the Base Foundation "*reported directly to the caliph, ISIS's shura, or advisory council, and ISIS's military commander and chief security officials*" (ibidem). By seeking to synchronize its messaging and actions, ISIS attempts to ensure that its information operations manifest as politico-military actions.

Decentralized dissemination is based on the assumption that, even though a province is defeated both on the ground and in cyberspace, the leadership project will take roots easily elsewhere.

Unlike other jihadist groups, ISIS's information operation successfully took into account real-world developments and, in order to prevent censorship, it did not consider the maintaining of an official website or single social media accounts. Alternatively, ISIS leveraged on a motivated "fan-base" that downloaded its online content and actively re-posted it on a variety of platforms, including mainstream social networks, file-sharing websites or messaging applications. The removal of accounts loyal to ISIS was contrasted through a powerful resurgence plan that provided for the diffusion of "shout out" messages and the continuous regeneration of accounts with the same username and profile picture.

Social networks, with Facebook and Twitter being a prominent example, have become one of the major vehicles for radicalization processes. They have facilitated the formation of what Benedict Anderson (1983) called an "imagined community", i.e. a borderless community of physically distant people unified by a sense of belonging to the same nation.

As Bindner and Gluck (2017) explain, since the end of the 2000s jihadists emerged from not easily accessible deep web forums and migrated towards the surface web, enabling a massive spread of virtual jihad. Nonetheless, when faced with an increase in international attempts to suppress its online propaganda especially in the wake of terrorist attacks, ISIS's members landed to Telegram, an encrypted broadcasting application. The latter allows for an instantaneous sharing of contents without limit of size. Therefore, operational security was preferred to communication reach.
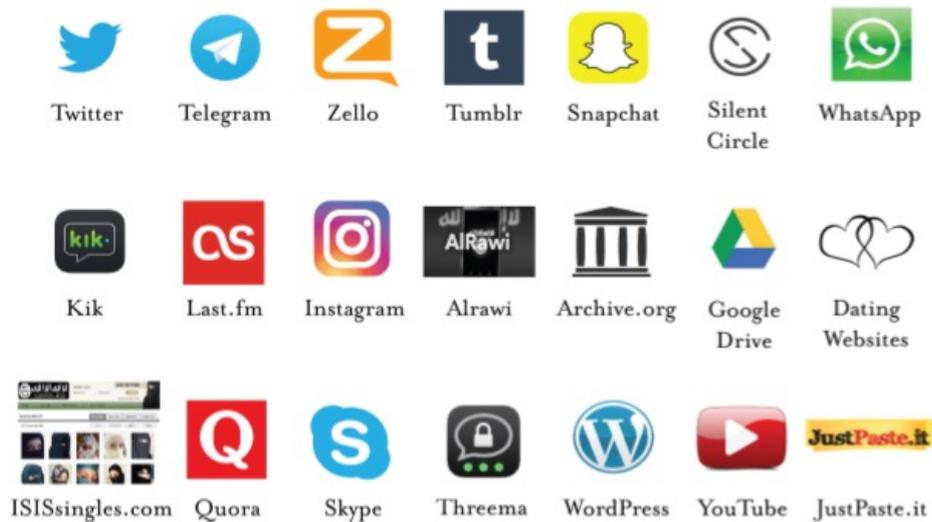
Fig.3: Online platforms employed by ISIS's followers

Source: Gambhir, H. (2016) *Online Platforms Used by ISIS's Supporters*
http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20The%20Virtual%20Caliphate%20Gambhir%202016.pdf [1/12/2017]

After conducting an extensive research on ISIS propaganda between July 17th and August 15th 2015, Charlie Winter (2015) found that ISIS's media apparatus articulates the group's narrative along six main lines, namely mercy, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war and utopia. Out of the 892 events examined - including audio statements, photosets, articles and videos - 861 prioritised victimhood, war and utopia.
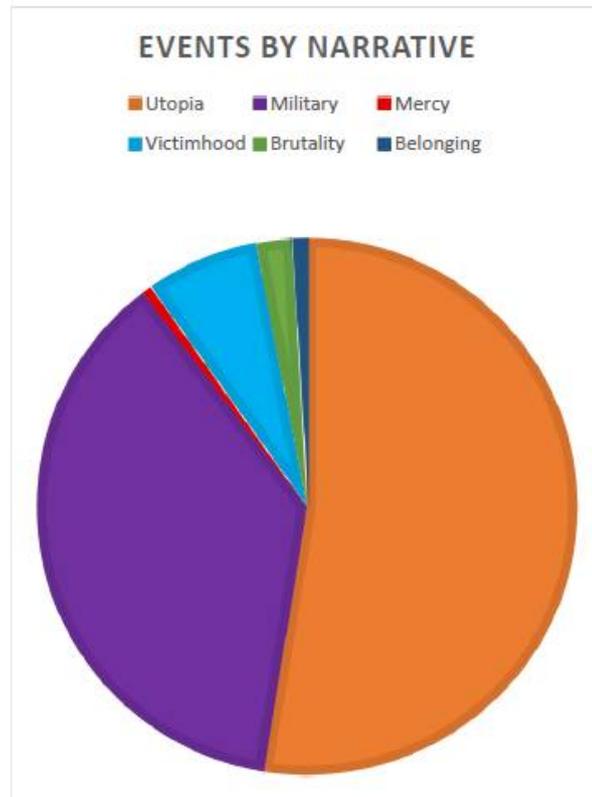
Fig.4: Main themes present in ISIS's narrative

Source: Winter, C. (2015) *Events by narrative* http://www.quilliaminternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf [1/12/2017]

As regards victimhood, the majority of the events was photographic in nature and depicted dead or injured, especially civilians. It represents a *leitmotiv* in jihadist narrative, because Sunni Muslims share the perception that they have always been made the scapegoats. In such a way, victimhood qualifies as a justifier for the group's existence.

War constitutes *"the Caliphate's raison d'être, its primary agent of change and revolution"* (Winter, 2015, 24). Therefore, ISIS must cultivate a triumphalist propaganda that idealises martyrdom in order to recruit foreign fighters.

Unsurprisingly, utopia appears to be the preeminent theme. By exalting all facets of everyday life in the new fully-fledged State - social life, religion, economic activity, implementation of the *shari'ah* and landscape- ISIS can succeed in exhibiting its supremacy over rival jihadist groups.

In conclusion, ISIS's propaganda machine works because it is flexible and thoroughly balances an institutional communication strategy and an emotional communication strategy

(Lombardi, 2015). The former seeks to spread the ideological manifesto, project the image of a legitimate state and counter the dominant narrative. The latter, instead, is directed at enhancing in-group mythology, causing viral behaviours and provoking debates.

FROM REAL TO VIRTUAL CALIPHATE

On June 29th 2014, Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi presented the establishment of the Caliphate as an immediate, fundamental objective. At the heart of ISIS's Real Caliphate sat two overriding pillars, namely migration to the Islamic State or *hijrah* and the oath of allegiance to the Caliph, *bay'ah* (Carmon, Yehoshua and Leone, 2014).

As it progressively lost terrain in Iraq and Syria in 2016, ISIS assigned its prolific global community a greater role: *"ISIS's brand in this case would not be contingent upon the existence of a physical caliphate, though it will likely endure, but rather upon ISIS's ability to encourage and facilitate terrorist attacks worldwide"* (Gambhir, 2016, 30).
ISIS's followers were thus incited to plan attacks in their homeland rather than to leave for the Caliphate. Lone wolves promptly welcomed the new virtual strategy and executed a global wave of attacks during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.
This rapid chain reaction, together with the will to make the pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State public on social media, gives a clear illustration of the huge impact of ISIS's political communication on an incredibly differentiated audience.

Notably, in order to compensate for battlefield and territorial losses, in 2016 ISIS reinvented its military strategy and retooled its image, seeking to expand globally in both the physical space – relocating its centre of gravity to its numerous *wilayats*- and the cyber space. The change in name of ISIS's showpiece magazine from Dabiq to Rumiyah demonstrates continued momentum despite military defeats and reflects a significant shift in emphasis from a real, physical caliphate to a self-empowering virtual one.

If Dabiq – the name of a city in the Aleppo governorate which features in Islamic apocalyptic prophecies as the site of a cataclysmic battle between Muslims and their Roman enemies based on *hadith* 6924 (Shay, 2016) - was conceived to brand ISIS as a functional Caliphate by asserting the group's legitimacy on the basis of its territorial control and ability to implement *shari'a* law, Rumiyah was produced to purvey thoroughly crafted narratives to amplify ISIS's

strengths and reframe its setbacks, while reassuring supporters of eventual victory. The title of the new flagship magazine refers to Rome and indicates the deliberate reconsolidation of ISIS's worldwide broadcast.

The evolution in narrative focus across issues of Dabiq and Rumiyah, with the emphasis put on the call for terrorist attacks to be executed outside the physical caliphate, has allowed ISIS to achieve three purposes: first, to impose significant collateral damage on enemy infrastructure in multiple locations across the world; second, to promulgate ISIS enduring influence by promoting its branding through claims of responsibility for the attacks; third, to provide virtual training ground and inspire a new generation of Internet-savvy militants through the documentation of their activities. In fact, the ISIS-inspired attacks that occurred from June to December 2016 echo those advocated in Rumiyah. 22-year-old Dahir Ahmed Adan employed steak knives in the mass stabbing attack at a shopping mall in Minnesota in September 2016 and was known to have had no previous connection to extremism (The Guardian, 2016). Furthermore, the perpetrator of the Ohio State University attack in November 2016, 18-year-old Abdul Razak Ali Artan, adopted both the knife and vehicle methods endorsed in Rumiyah when he drove his car into a crowd before charging out with a knife (CNN, 2016).

Thus, flexible information operations have shown themselves to be one of ISIS's greatest sources of resiliency, as they have supported the organization in rapidly adapting to changing circumstances and framed its victorious image in spite of military defeat. The loss of territory and the death of key leaders have only served to feed propaganda efforts.

The addition of Rumiyah to its ever-growing media apparatus has successfully marked ISIS's transition to a Virtual Caliphate, a radicalized, cyber-based community that could reinforce the global Salafi-jihadi movement and function independently of ISIS. It would consist of a network of individuals connecting via chat rooms, jihadi forums, and social media that would benefit from ISIS's legacy and could incorporate some aspects of ISIS's present day online recruitment network and proliferation of content, but is likely to self-organize to prioritize target and attack types and boost best practices. On the other hand, from its virtual safe haven ISIS will continue to coordinate and galvanise external attacks as well as create a solid support base until the organisation has the capability to reclaim physical territory (Coolsaet, 2017).

Clearly, the Virtual Caliphate will not necessarily be anchored to terrain. Many core aspects of the organization will be increasingly digitally executed, including communications, recruitment, cyberspace operations, public affairs, and possibly command and control. This new entity might re-characterize the threat of the global Salafi-jihadi movement.

CONCLUSION

Pattwell, Mitman and Porpora's theory of terrorism as failed political communication rests on the hypothesis that terrorists' communication is merely violent and destructive in nature and

neglects a constructive approach. On the contrary, ISIS's propaganda has tackled many themes, including belonging, camaraderie, joyfulness, utopia and the high-quality standards of life in Islamic State-held territories (Winter, 2015). The combination of heroism and tangible promises exerted much influence on an ever-growing number of people frustrated with life and in need of direction.
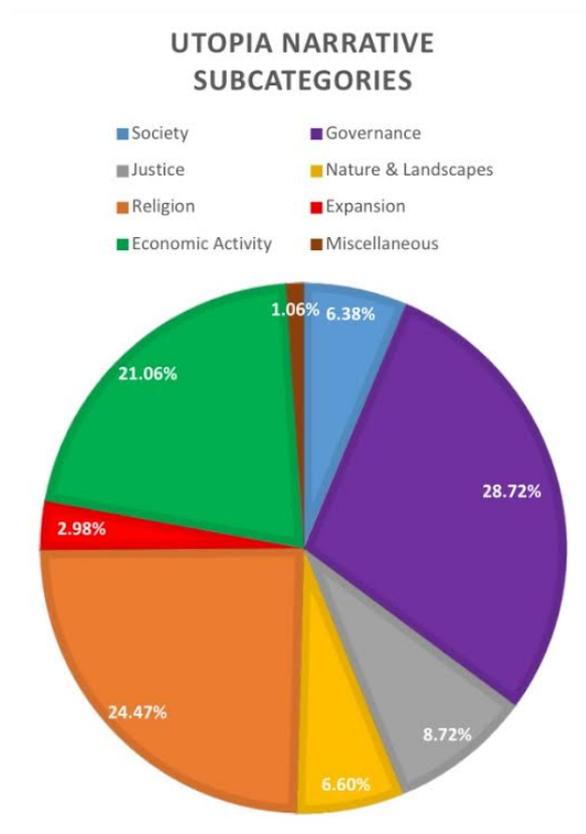

Fig.5: ISIS's utopia narrative subcategories

Source: Winter, C. (2015) *Utopia narrative subcategories*
http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20The%20Virtual%20Caliphate%20Gambhir%202016.pdf [1/12/2017]

Moreover, the theory of terrorism as failed political communication posits that it is impossible to obtain mutual understanding and a positive feedback by the audience due to the presence of a single source of information, namely the mainstream governmental one. ISIS, instead, has offered a valid counter-narrative through which it has been able to attract thousands of sympathizers and indoctrinate neutrals.

The overarching purpose of ISIS's Information Strategy is precisely to forge its audience's perceptions in line with its ideological tenets, polarize their support and rally them towards action by capitalizing on a combination of pragmatic and perceptual factors in its propaganda (Ingram, 2016). On the one hand, pragmatic factors, namely security, stability and livelihood, are leveraged in ISIS messaging by boosting the efficacy of its politico-military campaign and denigrating its enemies' efforts via a rational choice decision-making process based on a cost-benefit analysis. In fact, ISIS adheres to the understanding that its propaganda material should be directed at endorsing and propelling forward the group's political apparatus and, finally, winning over extensive support from the masses to advance the group's agenda. On the other hand, perceptual factors - linked to the interplay of in-group, Other, crisis and solution paradigms - are leveraged begging at identity-choice appeals that shape ISIS as the guardian of Sunni Muslims (the in-group identity), its enemies as Others accountable for Sunni perceptions of crisis, and ISIS as the only possessor of solutions to the crisis caused by Others.

ISIS has effectively placed major emphasis on pragmatic factors when targeting local populations and prioritized perceptual factors when appealing to regional and transnational audiences. This makes perfect strategic sense because local audiences need to be convinced and coerced to support ISIS's politico-military efforts. At a global level, instead, perceptual factors are more likely to resonate with transnational audiences that are outside of ISIS's direct sphere of control.

Drawing on all the above observations, ISIS's information operations may be regarded as a successful form of political communication.
ISIS has opened a new digital front and its accomplishments are expected to encourage other Salafi-jihadi organizations to avail themselves of social media, to address new audiences and promote a deeply engaging narrative.

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